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ABSTRACT

A social literacies perspective is used to analyze a rap written by a high school student. The article begins with an examination of the student's uses of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and standard English. The student writing sample and the researcher's analysis are subjected to review by two other African American teenagers, and these students' insights are used to interrogate the assumptions of analysis and research into language use. The article ends by claiming that teachers and researchers must engage students' literacy practices in order to enrich classroom life and conduct meaningful and socially just research. The study reinforces the need to continue the scholarly debate about the wisdom and efficacy of trying to impose standard English on all speakers and writers and argues that new ways to validate alternative literacies should be found that can be used as a means of helping students to become proficient users of dominant literacies. Twenty-four references are included. (KFT)

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Analyzing the Role of the Vernacular in Student Writing: A Social Literacies Approach

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In this article the authors present and use a social literacies perspective to analyze a rap written by a high school student. They begin by examining the student's uses of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and standard English. The student writing sample and the researchers' analysis are subjected to review by two other African American teenagers, and these students' insights are used to interrogate the assumptions of analysis and research into language use. The article ends by claiming that teachers and researchers must engage students' literacy practices in order to enrich classroom life and conduct meaningful, socially just research.

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Introduction

It seems that all talk today about reforming instruction in urban schools centers around one of two ideas: either we have to toughen academic standards, or we have to make curriculum responsive to the changing needs and identities of our student population. If teachers and researchers are going to take the latter recommendation seriously, one of the first tasks before us is to find ways to understand our students' writing. Currently, most evaluation of student writing focuses on technical deficits or strength of argument or organization; this avoids the ideological issues that underlie all types of evaluations. What we need is a new approach to student writing that recognizes and seeks to make intellectual and academic use of students' social literacies.

As veteran teachers who have worked in urban schools around the country, we recognize the need for radical instructional reform. Too many children are sitting in class, bored out of their minds and unable to make any connections between their needs and what they are receiving in school. Too many children in the city have stopped going to school altogether because it is simply not worth their time. As some educators have suggested (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez 1992), we should find ways to incorporate students' own funds of knowledge into school curricula. Also, we must

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look closely at students' written assignments - the expository compositions, narratives, and other types of creative writing they produce for teachers in school - and assess them for more than mechanical or stylistic "correctness." In addition, we must scrutinize our students' extracurricular literacy events and literacy practices, including the behaviors and meanings associated with reading and writing (Heath 1983). Once we do so we can learn what writing means to students and how it represents them. We will then be able to build curriculum around and out of student concerns and student literacies. We may then be able to understand what each of our students is bringing with him or her into the classroom, and better help each child benefit from a rich, truly useful education.

We need to take several kinds of steps to achieve this goal. First, we have to understand literacy as a social rather than an autonomous phenomenon (Street 1995). Urban teens make all kinds of deliberate decisions and judgments about communication throughout the day - what tone of voice should be used with the police officer? What does it mean that this authority figure uses African American Vernacular English with me? Should I respond in kind? - and yet we ignore these highly literate abilities, choosing instead to teach technical skills such as phonics in the classroom. Our conception of literacy needs to be extended and broadened considerably.

This is the purpose of our study. We hope to gain new insights into literacy by exploring students' feelings about writing and school. We hope to use these insights to critique and see more clearly the implications of the choices we have made in the past as English teachers. We hope to unpack some of the assumptions about literacy and learning that we currently hold as researchers of language, school, and students. Each of these goals fits into our larger hopes for our work with urban teenagers and schools. Paramount among these hopes is the desire to find ways to make urban teens and urban schools fit one another more successfully.

Research questions for this study include:

> (1) How do students' social and cultural traditions shape their writing in school?
>
> (2) How do students think about various academic audiences for their writings?
>
> (3) How do students negotiate the different expectations and standards occasioned by these different audiences?

Some of the more philosophical questions that drive our inquiry are: What are the sources of researchers' representations and interpretations of student writing? How are these representations and interpretations lim-

ited? What does a particular analytical approach say about us as teachers? As researchers?

To make use of any student writing we must find ways to analyze and represent it. This is another purpose of this paper: to examine the limits and uses of methodology in analyzing students' writing. We first clarify our methodological terrain, identify the theoretical framework for our study, and detail the phases of our inquiry (Section II). Next, in Section III, we describe and analyze our findings. In the next section we reflect on both our methodological approach and the ways in which we have analyzed our findings. The last two sections (V and VI) are devoted to implications for classroom teachers and literacy researchers.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This study is qualitative and interpretive in nature. It was carried out and is being reported by two former high school English teachers, Mollie Blackburn and Deborah Stern. We first selected a piece of student writing and analyzed it in an eclectic but rigorous way. This was "How Many?" a piece of writing by Casey[1] an 18-year-old African American male high school student in Athens, Georgia (see Figure 1). We then conducted interviews with two other students about writing in and out of school in general, and about the aforementioned sample of student writing in particular. We finished by reflecting on our findings in an effort to recognize that what counts as knowledge is fluid. It is more sensitive to complexities of social phenomena, and it must be seen as a recursive process including construction and legitimation (Lather 1992).

Our work allowed us to look closely at three of what Mitchell (1984) calls "telling cases": Casey's piece, our interview subjects' responses to this piece, and our own research methods. The "particular circumstances [in each of these cases]...serve to make previously obscure theoretical relationships suddenly apparent" (Mitchell 1984: 239). In the first two telling cases we regard language variety, students' own productions, and students' commentary as they relate to urban high school teachers' expectations, urban community values, and to youth culture. In the examination of our own methods of inquiry - that is, in the third telling case - we seek to understand our research in the context of our multiple roles as white, female, middle class ethnographers and high school teachers struggling with outsider status, academic discourse, and theory-based analysis. We are not implying that these telling cases are typical or represent general social or cultural truths. Rather, we understand them to be illustrations of "social fields" that provide contexts which surround linked events and relationships (Mitchell 1984).

[1] All students' names are pseudonums.

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It would be useful at this point to elaborate on how we approached each of the three data sources. First, we will discuss Casey's piece. This text, a rap written in AAVE, allows us to explore how alternative literacies function in the school context. Casey made choices in writing the rap that are embedded in social and political contexts. Casey's writing, like all literacy events, is surrounded by a multitude of behaviors and meanings that we cannot catalogue but must acknowledge.

The rap is an example of adolescent vernacular writing. This appeals to us because it gives us an opportunity to be "sensitive to local variation in literacy practices" (Street 1995: 149). We appreciate the vernacular as a viable variation of literacy practice. Like Street, we recognize the insistence of a single version of literacy to be intellectually meaningless, "culturally damaging," marginalizing, authoritative, and homogenizing. We agree with Street's claim that "different literacies have different powers" (Street 1995:140). We want to rescue vernacular writing from the margins into which it is so often forced in the academic arena. Another reason we look at a vernacular piece of writing is its social nature, which we believe to be central in literacy studies. In Camitta's study of adolescent vernacular writing, she defines vernacular as "creative, expressive, literate behavior ... liberated from the constraints of canon" (Camitta 1987: 6), and she states that "writing as it is practiced on the vernacular level is a social act" (Camitta 1987: 116). She argues that "[r]eal writing" is social (Camitta 1987: 116). Based on her assertion, in order to look at "real writing" we must look at social writing, and vernacular is one example of social writing.

How does a researcher look at social writing? We needed to create a new way of looking critically at written AAVE. We needed to adopt a believing stance toward what has traditionally been forbidden in the high school English classroom. We read "How Many?" paying attention to Casey's sense of audience, rhyme, structure, his uses of AAVE and standard English, his sensitivity to audience, mechanics, and spelling. A thorough account and analysis of our findings can be found in Section III.

In analyzing Casey's piece, we formed some tentative theories about his use of language. These theories are grounded in New Literacy Theory, which makes explicit some of the political and social realities inherent in all communication. For example, according to New Literacy Theory, the autonomous, skill-based model of literacy advocates a narrow, European and North American bias. This bias stigmatizes non-Western, oral cultures (Street 1995: 14), and imposes the underlying assumptions, power dynamics, and political and economic institutions of the dominating power upon the "illiterate" population.

New Literacy Theory was also of use to us in approaching the next phase of the study. How could we most effectively look into the social dimensions of "How Many?" Because of the complex codeswitching that

pervades the rap we thought it would be useful to show the piece to people who practice codeswitching regularly. Certainly many urban African American youth fit this description (Foster 1987). Stern had done some teaching in the West Philadelphia community, and was thus in touch with some African American teens. She contacted a former student, Graham, and invited him to come meet with the researchers one afternoon to talk about school, writing in general, and Casey's piece in particular. We thought it would be easier for Graham to speak if he had the support of a friend - another African American, another teenager, another male. And of course, "the natural interaction of peers can overshadow the effects of observation and helps us approach the goal of capturing the vernacular of everyday life" (Labov 1972: 256). Graham brought his friend, Norton, with him to the interview. Graham is 15, an honor student going into tenth grade. Norton is 13 and is going into eighth grade.

Our encounter with Graham and Norton reminded us to question critically our third source of data - our own research processes and practices. A reflexive stance allowed us to see deficits in both our analysis of Casey's piece and in our discussion of it with Graham and Norton. We also saw that our affiliation as teachers brought both complication and great advantage to the research process, giving us "intimate knowledge of the interconnections among the actors and events constituting the case study or social situation...[and thus] strategically plac[ing us] to appreciate the theoretical significance of these interconnections" (Mitchell 1984: 240).

Findings and Analysis

Our analysis of Casey's piece (see Appendix) closely resembles Gee's (1996) discourse analysis . Gee uses discourse analysis of stories and their contexts "to see the workings of sense making in social contexts with all their political and ideological ramifications" (p. 103). This search for deeper meaning, particularly social and political meaning, is what drove our analysis of Casey's rap.

We began by noting Casey's use of AAVE. Labov (1972) defines AAVE as "the relatively uniform dialect spoken by the majority of black youth in most parts of the United States" (Labov 1972: xii). He claims that "the major causes of reading failure are political and cultural conflicts in the classroom, and dialect differences are important because they are symbols of this conflict" (Labov 1972: xiv). The use of dialect differences, such as AAVE, is important because it is often rejected in the academic realm, yet it is powerful among its users. Labov (1972) reminds us that "it is the normal, intelligent, well-coordinated youth who is a member of the BEV culture[2]"(Labov 1972: 286). He goes on to say that those who do not use

[2]Labov uses the term "Black English Vernacular" (BEV), as opposed to African American Vernacular English, in keeping with the terminology of the early 1970's.

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AAVE, who are not part of a vernacular peer group, "give up the satisfaction of a full social life and any first hand knowledge of the vernacular culture" (Labov 1972: 286).

"How Many?" is replete with instances of AAVE. We found thirteen occurrences of AAVE and eleven incidences of other vernacular English varieties. Examples of AAVE in Casey's poem include the weakening of consonant clusters at the end of words, such as "mo" (ll. 1 and 3) and "yo" (l. 5) and the omission of the verb "to be" (ll. 4, 6, 7, 10, and 21). "[G]otta" (ll. 1, 3, and 4), "wanna" (l. 9), "cause" (l. 10) and "ain't" (l. 12) are some examples of other vernacular English that Casey used in this piece. We noticed that 22 of the 24 vernacular occurrences are before line 17.

At line 17 Casey stopped using vernacular, changed from black to blue ink, modified his handwriting a bit, and shifted his discourse organization. The shift at line 17 captures our attention and complicates our selection of this piece. Did Casey's sense of audience change? Did he start writing for his teacher at line 17? Why did he decide to shift from vernacular to more formal, standard English?

Gee (1996) asserts that people tend to use the vernacular when they are more concerned with "solidarity and bonding with those to whom they are speaking" and are more likely to use the standard when they are more concerned with "status ... respect, dignity, and social distance" (Gee 1996: 91). Considering this assertion, what does Casey's shift in language say about his relationship to school and to his audience? What is he telling us?

Next we looked at discourse organization features in the shift in Casey's rap. Evidence of Casey's discourse organization is in his structure, patterns, and rhymes. These define Casey's writing as rap and suggest Casey's involvement in "a specific cultural tradition of sense making" (Gee 1996: 114), a tradition fixed in African American music. Evidence of his shift exists in the change of ink color, print style, use of vernacular, and mood. We interpreted his shift away from AAVE use and toward a didactic tone as a shift in audience from peers to teachers. Although we recognize that "[t]here are always, in principle, many interpretations of a text, a text can always be interpreted at different levels (more or less 'deeply'), and interpretations can never be proven" (Gee 1996: 101). Camitta (1987) and Shuman (1986) support our interpretation of intention behind Casey's shift. Camitta (1987) asserts that "[a]dolescent vernacular writing is often geared to an immediately accessible or imaginable audience who shares a common experience or frame of reference" (Camitta 1997: 142). Shuman (1986) says, "Adolescents wrote for adults most often at school" (Shuman 1986: 97). So perhaps vernacular writing suggests an audience of peers, with whom solidarity is important (Gee 1996), and the absence of vernacular suggests a more distant audience, such as teachers or other adults, for whom status is more important (Gee 1996). What does such a shift say about societal influences on Casey's literacy? What does this say about the power of various

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literacies? So what? What are the educational implications?

These are questions we did not answer in our initial analysis. We still needed to push the social and political boundaries of our analysis - to consider power relationships involved in social practices that influence the conceptions of reading and writing in various cultural contexts (Street 1995).

Next we scanned the piece for rhyme, which drew our attention to structure. We found 14 pairs of rhymes, or couplets. Nine of the couplets span two lines, for example, "How MANY 'mo feen's you gotta serve/ I gotta know how long you on the curve" (ll. 3 & 4). The following line, "Wasting 'yo life cutting time like a knife" (l. 5), is one example of the five couplets that is on a single line. We found no structural pattern explaining these choices. We contemplated the inconsistency. We thought maybe the single-lined couplets are distinct from the double-lined couplets in terms of meter, but scanning the poem for meter proved otherwise. Perhaps he put all of his figures of speech on single-lined couplets. This is true with the exception of the figure of speech that occurs after the shift in line 17. We hypothesized that he put short couplets on single lines and long ones on two lines, but lines 9 & 10, 12 & 13, and 22 & 23 disprove this theory in that these couplets comprise two short lines. For example, lines 12 & 13 are, "It ain't gone last/ Only end with a blast." Perhaps Casey's choices about how many lines to use when writing couplets were random.

We focused on non-standard mechanics during our next reading and found four prelexical apostrophes, such as those in "'mo" (ll. 1 and 3) and "'yo" (l. 5), and seven intralexical apostrophes which occur before S's, such as those in "dime's" (l. 1), "time's" (l. 2), and "feen's" (l. 3). We speculated that these may represent hypercorrected mechanics.

We also noticed non-standard spelling. We thought that these words might have been phonetically accurate according to the author's pronunciation, since Casey is a southern speaker of AAVE. Either that or that they too were evidence of hypercorrection. For example, perhaps Casey wrote "sale" for "sell" as a result of pronouncing the word with a southern accent. We wondered whether he pronounces "marijuana" like he spells it, "marijuwanna," or whether this spelling suggests hypercorrection.

Our initial concerns regarding the shift at line 17 emerged repeatedly throughout our analysis. The shift was apparent in many ways besides the changes in ink color and print style. The rhyme scheme seems more forced in two of the four couplets in the second part. For example, Casey used "house" to rhyme with "out." There are significantly fewer occurrences of vernacular English and hypercorrected mechanics after the shift. Did Casey's sense of audience change? If so, did that change influence his literacy choices? Were we witnessing "the uses and meanings of literacy [as they] entail struggles over particular identities up against other identities, often imposed ones" (Street 1995: 135)? Had we located a "cite of tension between authority and power on the one hand and individual resistance and creativity on the other hand" (Street 1995: 162)?

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For the next series of findings and analyses, we must look to our second data source: the interview with Graham and Norton. We met with the boys on a summer morning in an unused auditorium at Graham's high school, which was open for summer school. Both Graham and Norton were friendly and shared their feelings about school and writing freely. Both boys are intelligent, polite, and forthright. Both separate school from "life outside of school," but they assign different values to these two domains. (All unascribed quotations in this section come from the interview conducted 7/24/98). Our interview progressed from a specific discussion about what the boys were doing this summer to their feelings about school in general. This shift happened organically. In discussing their summer activities (Graham was taking summer school courses and Norton was doing carpentry with his father), Graham and Norton consistently drew distinctions between "school stuff" and "life stuff." Norton told us that he never wrote anything for school that he enjoyed, and contrasted this with the kind of writing he enjoyed very much: writing lyrics to share with Graham and other peers. We learned from Graham and Norton's descriptions of this writing that one critical element of out-of-school writing that mattered to the boys was its collaborative nature. When the boys write for one another, give each other feedback, and read each others' lyrics aloud, they are engaging in a process that is, as Camitta (1993) tells us, collaborative, recursive, and performative. We spent about a half an hour discussing these writing-and sharing-processes, and then showed the boys Casey's piece. This text further opened up discussion about what was appropriate in school discourses versus what is appropriate in non-school discourse in terms of authorial tone, subject matter, mechanics, use of slang, profanity, and ethical position.

The boys referred again and again to how differently they felt about using language and writing in school and using language and writing outside of school. Norton said he only liked "writing if it's like my pleasure," and went on at length about how different this personal writing is from what he writes for school. If he is "getting a grade for it," he has to follow the teacher's rules, and he does not enjoy that. When Norton writes lyrics for himself and his friends, on the other hand, he does not have to follow anyone's rules but his own. He told us that in this writing he uses "a lotta big words all the time. They don't make no sense...I don't even know what I'm sayin'. I could be talking about pork and toothbrushes!" (or some such unlikely juxtaposition of concepts). The one time Norton was invited to write a rap for school, he didn't like it "because it made sense" !

For Norton, good writing needs to be neither coherent nor mechanically correct. He knows the rules to follow for writing in school, and consciously rejects them. This means that he is free to indulge in language play only in his own writing. He is unable to play with language and meaning in school where standard English and correctness is stressed over sound and rhythm, and where he is penalized for his alternate literacy.

Norton's unorthodox criteria for good writing illustrates Lea and Street's (1998) proposal that there are epistemological presuppositions "hidden under technical attention to supposedly generic features of academic writing" (Lea & Street 1998: 30). When we read writing by a young, urban, African American boy such as Norton, and it makes no sense to us, we assume that he has not mastered the rules and conventions of standard English. We rarely think that Norton is freely choosing to devalue technical correctness (Giroux 1983), but it is clear that he is doing just that in his preference for aural and affective elements. This tendency was also evident in Norton's response to Casey's piece. After reading this piece, Norton told us that "How Many?" seemed old-fashioned to him. He said, "...it seem like, like this was written in '92" - a time that for Norton is far in the past, a time when rap was less rhythmically complex, and when rappers used the simple rhyme scheme and metronomical rhythm that characterizes Casey's piece.

We gain one striking insight from Norton's preferences. His priorities and criteria for good writing show us that in emphasizing coherence and correctness - that is, in reproducing the values of in-school writing - our analytical apparatus ignores two critical qualities of Casey's piece: sound and rhythm. We are not sensitive to these aspects of the piece, as Graham and Norton are, for many reasons. We don't write raps. We don't listen to them with as much concentration. We are English teachers and researchers into language, and our analytical apparatus is replete with proof of this fact. We approached Casey's piece as if it were a poem, a linguistic sample, a literary text - anything but a piece of music.

Graham's focus is different from Norton's, and also affords us further information about how inquirers into language make meaning from a text. Graham is more invested in formal aspects of writing than Norton is. He admitted that sometimes he makes mistakes when he writes, and added that he doesn't "have a problem making mistakes. That's how we learn." Like Norton, Graham shares his lyrics with his peers, but unlike Norton, he is not looking for affirmation of how good his lyrics "sound." Also unlike Norton, Graham wants his friends to tell him if he has made spelling or other mechanical errors. For Graham, the differences between writing for teachers in school and writing for himself or his friends out of school do not lie in attention to coherence or rhythm. He writes as correctly - which, for Graham, means standard English - as he can for all audiences.

This may be because Graham is quite committed to mastering standard English, which for him is a "secondary discourse" (Gee 1996: 142). He welcomes correction that improves his ability to use this other discourse, and seems to believe that all technical conventions of his primary discourse are mistakes - or are at least inappropriate to use in writing in or out of school. For Graham, what differentiates in-school writing from out-of-school writing is the writing's content or message. When he read Casey's piece, Graham zeroed in on the shift at line 17. It was the first thing on which he

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remarked. Graham believed that the first part of the piece is an endorsement for the drug-dealing life, and that the second part of the piece, which cautions against this kind of activity, may not even have been written by Casey. It is so school-appropriate, in fact, that Graham thought a teacher must have written it. Graham explained this belief: "I think because from [lines] 1 to 16, he's, he like talkin' about the life like he's lived it. And the other part, he's talking about... like [a] teacher could be talking about what she saw happening." Graham's comments also showed that he is sensitive to what Fairclough (1992, quoted in Ivanic, 1992) calls the two components of interpersonal meaning: the representation of social identities (who is the author at the end of the piece?) and the representation of social relations (Who is the author in relation to the preaching voice at the end of the piece? Who is the author in relation to the drug dealer at the beginning of the piece?).

These insights show us another aspect of "How Many?" that our analytical apparatus omits: What is Casey's attitude toward his drug-dealing protagonist? What is Casey's ethical responsibility as an author who will be read by youth, by adults, and by people outside the community? We have noted that there is some ambivalence on this point (see section II), but this ambivalence does not cause us to question Casey's credibility. Graham and Norton seemed to have conflicting feelings about Casey's shift in voice. On the one hand, they valued the first sixteen lines of Casey's piece because they reflect "reality." On the other hand, Graham especially was uncomfortable with the idea of receiving this pro-drug message in school and thought that Casey's piece ought to be shown, if at all, to 11th and 12th graders, only, because "it's like teachin' kids that sellin' weed is OK." Young children do not need to hear this message in school. Norton, on the other hand, thought the piece was appropriate for school children in 4th grade and above.

One other aspect of the piece that we completely ignored but that played a central role in Graham and Norton's analysis of it was Casey's use of profanity. On lines 9-10, the piece reads: "You wanna quit/ Cause you feeling like shit." Graham and Norton could not help but pay attention to this bold rejection of school-writing protocol. Students are simply not allowed to use profanity in their writing for school. The word "shit" was, for Norton, what stood out most in the piece - more than rhythm, more than street credibility. This fact impacted on whether the boys felt the piece was appropriate for school, and on their feelings about Casey as an author.

At this point in our critique of our original analytical apparatus, it is clear that we ignored at least three important aspects of Casey's piece: rhythm, accurate or credible representation of street culture, and profanity. Should we have paid attention to these aspects? Could we have? What else did we miss? First, it is our belief that even though he was writing for school, Casey wanted to make his piece as authentic, as vernacular (Camitta 1987) as possible. Casey's intentions are made clear by his deliberate use of

AAVE and his choice of subject matter.

But he was also writing for a teacher, and both Graham and Norton noted this conflict in different ways. As previously discussed, Graham points out that although Casey wrote "How Many?" at the request of a teacher, his authorial tone seems to shift from conspiratorial to judgmental. Not surprisingly, Norton saw Casey's shift differently, as one of rhythm and affect. Rapping a few of Casey's lines, Norton demonstrated how you can hear the shift at line 17 by reading the lines out loud ("Doot doot dooh...see? This is like poetry. It's the way you say it. Poetry is jazzier"). The shift was represented as well in the kind of language Casey began using after the break ("See? The way he rappin' up here [after line 17] - 'the route to all evil,' he wouldn't say nothing' like that...it sound like poetry").

Passing judgment, noting stilted poetic homilies and ignoring rhythm - these are characteristics of the kind of writing that Graham and Norton associate with school. They are also features of our analytical apparatus. More than anything, Graham and Norton's fresh perspective on writing shows us how much our analytical approach has been determined and circumscribed by our own experiences in school. We did not look at "How Many?" as an example of collaborative or musical or reality-based vernacular writing. Instead, we focused on Casey's use of nonstandard English, on metaphor, and other rhetorical features - the formal aspects of the piece that trouble Graham and Norton, and which typified for them the conflicts between writing for in-school audiences and writing for audiences outside of school. What mattered to the boys were Casey's experiences, his use of profanity, and his credibility as a representer of street culture. Our approach bypassed these concerns.

We might have constructed an analytical apparatus that was more inclusive and more useful if we had conducted this interview before making sense of Casey's piece ourselves, and tried to incorporate the insights we gained from talking to Graham and Norton. But our approach was limited by our position as outsiders. Norton summed this up most succinctly. When we asked the boys at the end of the interview to help us understand Casey's piece by teaching it to us, Norton said he could help readers understand the piece by asking them to situate themselves in relation to it. If he were teaching the piece, Norton said, "I ask you where you live, first. Cause you live where we live, you know what we talking about. I'd break it down to you."

Reflections on Methods and Findings

Complicating factors arose in each stage of our inquiry into literacy practices and schooling. First, our analysis of "How Many?" was hindered by our tendency to dichotomize the standard and the non-standard. When we looked at mechanics, we discussed them in terms of the standard. That

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which we identified as hypercorrected was hypercorrected according to the standard. When we looked at spelling, our focus was on non-standard spellings. We called it non-standard; we were separating it and identifying it as "other." Does calling "non-standard" or "vernacular" somehow neutralize its negativity? Does the fact that we noted Casey's AAVE with boldface type remove the stigma of traditionally red-penned errors? What kinds of values are implicit in the word "vernacular"? Shuman (1986) problematizes our respect for the standard. She writes, "[T]he notion of standardization in literature or any art form involves a great irony" in that the distinctive stands out from the common in that it has standards, but "great literature is distinguished from lesser literature on the basis of uniqueness and nonconformity to standards" (Shuman 1986: 190). She differentiates linguists from literacy scholars in that the former "have regarded standardization as the key factor that makes written and oral communications significantly different" (Shuman 1986: 184), and the latter "are concerned with written texts in terms of the kind of information they contain" (Shuman 1986: 186). Perhaps our greatest impediment in identifying social and political meaning in Casey's piece was assuming the roles of linguists rather than literacy scholars.

Our interview with Graham and Norton was similarly complicated by a variety of factors. Our different teaching styles led us to adopt different researcher styles; Blackburn tended to be extremely empathetic, offering affirming, compassionate rejoinders to many statements made by the boys. Stern was eager to collaborate and asked the boys more leading questions. How did these variations impact on the kinds of responses and information the boys offered? Furthermore, in producing and interpreting two quite dissimilar sets of fieldnotes, we recognize how differing written accounts might turn interpretation toward or away from certain themes. Such variability is inevitable when an event becomes an interpretable text. Indeed, as we learn from studying ethnography as a methodology, all written accounts of oral experiences are limited by the very fact of their transcription. As Hammersley and Atkinson tell us, "Written language is an analytical tool, not a transparent medium of communication"(Hammersly & Atkinson 1995: 240).

Another factor that might be compromising our interpretations is the extremely limited scope of our study. How representative are Graham and Norton's viewpoints? Have we in fact created an "apt illustration" (Mitchell 1984: 237) of the social relationships among two white, female, former teachers conducting research into literacies in the city with two teenaged, African American boys? Or do the special circumstances of our various relationships with one another (Stern has been Graham's teacher. Blackburn and Stern may be reluctant to expose their teacher voices in front of each other. Norton may have been trying to impress his older peer throughout the interview) compromise all of our statements in important ways? Also, the decision to test our analytical apparatus via an interview with two lo-

cal teenagers may have yielded some interesting insights, but it may also perhaps be woefully incomplete as a test of that apparatus. More than anything else, what this interview makes clear is that Blackburn and Stern still act like teachers: they lead, they ingratiate themselves, they challenge the boys to confront difficult concepts and express their own viewpoints, and they validate and encourage everything that the boys say. Is this any way to conduct research? We may be challenging the research community, but we say emphatically, that yes, it is.

Finally, in the same way that our written account of the interview with Graham and Norton suffers from the limitations of transcription, so too, is Casey's piece compromised as it gets further and further from its source. Our study may be doing Casey's piece a gross disservice by thrusting it into new contexts, to be read by strangers in other academic environments, in other cities. This is a risk that every written piece runs, recalling Plato's dilemma (Gee 1996: 26-31). Plato said that dialogic communication alone is authentic. Only dialogue allows a reader to consult an author, and only dialogue allows an author to revise, clarify, or restate meaning.

Although we have discussed the deficits in both our analytical apparatus and our testing of it, we think that the nature of these flaws is itself significant. Yes, we are far removed from our texts, but all readers, even all authors experience a certain degree of distance from actual experience once it is transcribed and frozen via textual representation (Gee 1996). And yes, our research goes back and forth from discovery of new insights to confirmation of our hypotheses - but isn't that also a defining feature of all reflexive research? And finally, we can view our affiliation as teachers as bringing both complication and great advantage into the research process. This affiliation gives us "intimate knowledge of the interconnections among the actors and events constituting the case study or social situation...[and we are thus] strategically placed to appreciate the theoretical significance of these interconnections" (Mitchell 1984: 240). Clearly, this study suggests some new considerations and caveats for research into student writing, in and out of school. The implications for teaching and for research are discussed in the next two sections.

Implications for Classrooms

If it does nothing else, this study reinforces our need to continue the conversation about imposing standard English on all speakers and writers of nonstandard English at school. Many scholars (Heath 1983; Delpit 1995; Smitherman 1977, 1981) have joined this debate, and when the scope of the debate is extended to include nonnative English-speaking students, its political as well as pedagogical implications are enormous. Effective communicators like Casey, Graham, and Norton show us the fallacy of the concept of verbal deprivation (Labov 1972: 202). They also push us to devise new ways to validate alternative literacies and aid us in helping students

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become proficient users of dominant literacies.

Can we do these two things simultaneously? How? We can invite students to bring examples of non-school literacy practices into the classroom, and use them as the basis for careful, student-centered analysis (Stern 1995). We can increase urban students' access to the assumptions and implications of standard English in general by making school a place where students inquire into language and meaning-making (Fecho 1995). Both these forms of inquiry rely on urban teens' experiences and expertise (Heath & Mangiola 1991). The trick is to make sure that these students are given opportunities to practice standard English while they are studying the power dynamics inherent in its use and in its variations.

Probably the most useful tool at our disposal for making in-school writing matter to students is the model of collaborative literacy which has been indicated by both our interview subjects and by some New Literacy scholars. Can we set up critical, affirming, authentic peer groups in classrooms that function like Graham and Norton's group of lyric-reading friends? Can we link urban teens via the Internet, as Moll and Diaz (1987) have suggested, so that they can carry on dialogues about each others' writing across towns and states? Can we establish writing collectives in the same way that teachers such as Cone (1994) have set up reading groups in which high school students dialogue with one another about their responses to literature? While there are potential difficulties in all these suggestions in terms of classroom management, expense, and authors' vulnerability, each one is inspiring and might help make in-school writing less a hated, evaluated entity (as it is for Norton), and more a dialogic way for students to know the world.

This approach may make school more enjoyable for some students. Will it make them more academically successful? Labov (1972) says a student's verbal skills on the street will not necessarily bring him or her success in the classroom (Labov 1972: 213). This is true, given our current exclusive emphasis on school literacy. But as this study implies, urban teachers can do their students a great service by taking a social literacy stance in regards to student writing. As Lee's (1993) work shows, when teachers approach nonstandard English and non-school literacies with respect and intellectual rigor, they not only gain insight into their students' writing but also help their students make crucial links between school and the streets.

Forming these bridges may be a new task for teachers, but it is only one of several new roles that a social literacy stance calls upon teachers to assume. Moll, et. al. (1992) suggest that teachers build curriculum around students' funds of knowledge, which teachers investigate by acting as field researchers into students' social contexts. Remembering how busy a teacher's day is, we would amend this suggestion somewhat and ask students to be the ones to investigate and articulate their social contexts as part of their inquiry into language and literacy. Teachers would share the process of discovery and help students arrive at new insights. Based on

our own collaboration, we would also suggest that teachers who decide to work with student writing from a social literacy stance enlist the help of one or more colleagues and/or students. As Graham and Norton showed us, we all know more together than we do apart. Or, as Norton put it so neatly, participating in social literacy research made him "feel special because everybody don't know what I know."

Implications for Research

Our study has important research implications that suggest that research should work for social change, be reflexive, and insist on being real. These implications demand that researchers commit themselves to improving society, complicating their work, and listening closely to the people who contribute to their research.

We celebrate the activist, rather than the academic nature of research. Gee (1996) tells us that "[w]e ought to be much less interested in creating a new science than in creating a new society" (Gee 1996: 65). Although we did construct a new technical apparatus with which to analyze students' vernacular writing, our construction and our critique of it are located in a larger effort to work toward a more just society that values vernaculars and the powers of various literacies in various contexts.

We struggled not only to make our inquiry into literacy activist but also personal. In our study, we examined the realities of the lives of Casey, Graham, and Norton, as their writing and conversation reveals them; and we investigated how school as a social structure shapes their decisions to use different literacies in different contexts. This illustrates Weiler's (1988) assertion that research should "address the relationship between structural oppression and the realities of individual lives" (Weiler 1988: 59).

Reflexivity is also essential to the kind of activist research we advocate. It demanded that we problematize our white, middle class, female, former teachers' approach to a piece written by an African American, working class, male student. A reflexive stance is also what led us to recognize our limitations as outsiders and compelled us to solicit input from Graham and Norton.

As researchers, we must address the real lives of kids in classrooms. What can we do to learn about these lives? How can we make a difference? How can we make school more meaningful for students? In order for researchers to answer such questions we must start by listening to what students are telling us. It is not enough to hint at valuing AAVE by identifying it in student writing, as we did with Casey's piece. We need to make explicit our respect for AAVE as a critical ingredient of a social literacy by inviting and incorporating the insights of a few of its speakers and writers into related research.

Of course, this complicates literacy studies. It is easier to read articles

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that point to characteristics of AAVE and then find those characteristics in written documents - but when operating like this, researchers might fail to note what is significant to AAVE speakers. Fortunately we found Graham and Norton to identify these qualities for us. Other researchers who study student writing and social literacies must find and listen to students talk about what they know: issues of race, class, gender, and power. From these conversations, researchers can develop a better understanding of how to read students' written productions and commentaries, and can co-construct analytical structures that reflect both groups' understandings. Without such collaboration literacy research is handicapped, cannot serve students, and cannot effectively work for social justice.

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